He Made Misfortune Hold the Ladder of Success

By BERENICE C. SKIDELSKY

A thirty-one year old Italian sculptor modeled the bust of Thomas Edison which received so much attention on the occasion of the great inventor's birthday anniversary a few weeks ago.

This is the story behind that bust, the story of a stranger in a strange land who has known cold and hunger and loneliness but who has never forgotten his ideals.

It is a story of faithfulness of purpose and loyalty to ideals.

Necessity made this youth work at anything which would bring him bread—but he kept his eyes on his star.

This is his secret: to have an abiding faith in yourself and to keep your gaze fixed on your ultimate goal.

ONORIO RUOTOLO

THE birthday of Thomas Edison, not long ago, was heralded throughout the country by widespread reproductions of a bust of the great inventor, conceived by an Italian-American sculptor, Onorio Ruotolo, and called by him "The Brother of Prometheus."

Several months earlier, a bust of Cardinal Mercier, called "The Prince of Sorrows," brought nation-wide repute to the same artist.

The life and the struggles of the man who, at the age of thirty-one, finds himself a recognized figure in his chosen field, show many of the elements of veritable romance. He cannot remember a time when he did not want to be a sculptor; and among his earliest recollections are jaunts, when about six or seven, with his little sister to some clay heaps not far from the town of his birth, to gather the raw material for an expression toward which some obscure impulse was directing him.

When he was twelve, his father took him to Naples, the nearest big city to his home. It was the elder Ruotolo's intention that his son should learn mechanical drawing, with a view to becoming a naval engineer. But the young artist rebelled; and after some altercation the father withdrew his opposition, telling the boy that he would leave him to work out his own destiny. Consigning the young Onorio to the care of an aunt, and arranging for monthly remittances, the father returned home.

Here was the child, bent upon an artistic career, but without the faintest idea how to set about it. He bethought himself of Giuseppe Errico, a well-known writer whom he had once met at home, and who was the only person other than his aunt that he knew in Naples. He set out to find him—not an easy task in Naples, either, for a forlorn small boy with no access to directories nor guide-books, and no knowledge of the city. A weary two hours' walk brought him at last to his destination, and the result of his visit was that he was directed to an artist, Edoardo Dalbono, to whom he showed some sketches, and who in turn sent him to the Director of the Royal Academy.

Now he made his first acquaintance with what is known as "red tape." He found himself bewildered by the myriad papers he was called upon to produce—birth certificate, good conduct record, a voucher from the mayor of his city, and so forth. His problem was complicated by his fear of annoying his father, lest the latter change his mind and insist again upon engineering.

Then came another difficulty. The secretary of the academy demanded thirty lire (about six dollars in those days) as an entrance fee.

The twelve-year-old urchin was in despair. This was a fortune quite beyond his achievement. And he dared not ask his father. Hopelessly, he asked if there were any way to avoid payment. Yes, he was told, he might take part in a competitive examination. Here was a gleam of hope; but when he saw the fifty-nine other aspirants, his little heart sank. Yet manfully he took the tests; and for six long days he labored at the tasks that were set him.

Four awards were made. He was one of the recipients! It was too good to be true. He went around with his little head in the clouds, and a feeling that he was a giant who had conquered the world.

His work began. After a month in the first class, he was promoted to the second; and there, although the youngest member, he was the winner in a prize contest.

His association with the academy lasted for six years. During that time, dissatisfied with a certain promiscuity of instruction, he prowled around on his own initiative, seeking to supplement the inherent deficiencies of class instruction by individual research. In the course of his investigations in old churches, museums, and so on, he came upon some work by the great Gemito. It was a revelation to him. He determined that at all costs he must meet the master. He was warned that Gemito was "crazy," that he was "personally impossible," and other things of the same order; but the artist in him responded too enthusiastically to the artist he discerned in the works of Gemito for him to be deterred.

How to get at the eccentric sculptor, however, was another matter. Gemito's unfriendliness to intruders was notorious. Finally the young Onorio hit upon a plan. He presented himself at the house of Gemito as a tailor's boy come upon an errand.

Gemito looked at him piercingly.

"What do you want here?" he demanded.

"I—come from the tailor—" faltered the boy.

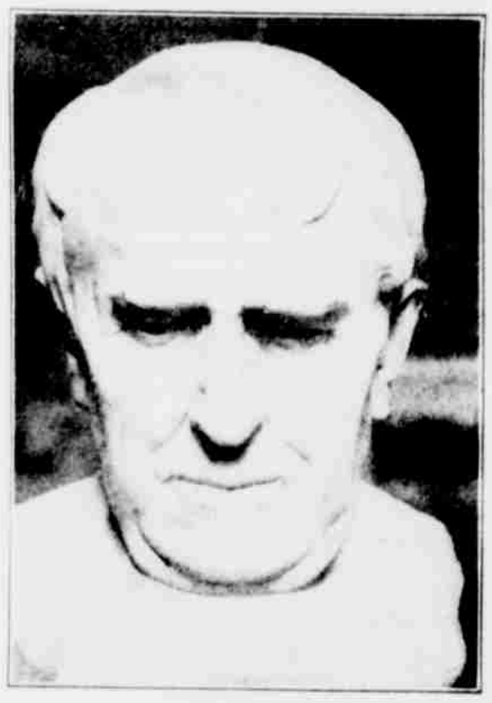
Gemito's gaze did not soften.

"No," he said at last, "you do not. You are an artist."

The boy confessed; and a friendship sprang up between the two which lasted until Ruotolo's departure for America. He was permitted to come every day, to bring his sketches, to help the great sculptor at his work. Here it was, he declares, that he received the really vital part of his artistic education.

Meanwhile, in the early days of his Naples experience, his aunt's housewifely instincts had rebelled at the way in which he cluttered up the place with his clay, paints, drawing materials, and other paraphernalia; and she had voiced her protests. So the little fellow marched forth, and found himself a room elsewhere. It was a poor room, in a poor house; but it was his very own, and it meant liberty of action, which he felt rather than knew to be essential to his progress.

His father's allowance, sufficient for bare necessities, did not provide for sundry other expenses—models, for example, and enough of the materials needed in his work. To eke out his income, therefore, the little fellow made postcards in water color, for which a neighboring art store paid him from four to eight cents each.



A STUDY OF EDISON

"The Brother of Prometheus."

Thomas A. Edison, as conceived by Onorio Ruotolo, the sculptor, of New York City. Edison was 73 years old on February 11th.

When he was about eighteen, a contest was announced, the subject being a statue of the wife of Garibaldi. Ruotolo entered the ranks. But no award was made, because the whole affair became embroiled in some political bickerings that destroyed it.

Disgusted with this mixture of art and politics, young Ruotolo determined to come to America, the land of liberty. He had always liked America, anyway. The comparatively young nation across the seas fired his imagination—gave him a sense of the gigantic, of the titanic, which was the aspect of life that best harmonized with his temperament.

An early disillusion came from the way in which other artists received him. He had expected to be met in a spirit of camaraderie, as a member of the great fraternity of art; and he thought it would be an easy matter to take up his career where he had left off. Instead, he was greeted with coldness, with indifference, even with suspicion in some cases. He had arrived with very little money. In a short time he faced the problem that is no respecter of persons—for artist and layman alike must have food and shelter.

For several months the young foreigner made ineffectual efforts to get work along his own line. Finally, at the end of his tether, he applied to a glass mosaic factory for the position of designer. He was told that they had no such office; and driven by desperate need he became a simple workman in the establishment at nine dollars a week. His artistic sense was affronted by the models they were using, and he made some new ones. These were received enthusiastically, and they created the position of designer for him, adding ten dollars to his weekly wage.

But alas for his excessive zeal! In a few weeks he had made so many new designs that the foreman told him there were enough for several seasons. He could not retrogress again to workman, and so once more he was out of a job.

With the little money saved, he allowed himself the respite to do some creative work. He had some petty commissions, whose financial returns were practically negligible. But for about a year he lived almost exclusively on what he could earn as a cartoonist for an Italian newspaper. Five cartoons a week at two dollars each meant ten dollars a week. There were lean weeks, though, when he could not sell so many.

This precarious living was pretty unsatisfactory. Then somebody came along and offered him a job in a terra cotta factory. Here, working in sweltering heat from 7:30 a. m. until evening, and then going out into the January cold, he took sick and was forced to give it up.

After numerous vicissitudes, he found himself with ten dollars between him and starvation. What was to be done? An inspiration came—he would insert an ad in an Italian newspaper, to the effect that an artist would make a portrait in one sitting for ten dollars, at the home of the sitter. The decision once taken, action quickly followed. The results exceeded his fondest hopes. He was fairly swamped with orders. The experience, he says now, was rich not only in monetary gain but in an increased knowledge of human nature in varied aspects.

He found himself, at the end of several months of this activity, quite a capitalist on a small scale. He invested his money in a newspaper, which after a brief but exciting existence, proved a fiasco. He then became an embroidery designer, gathered a little money and gave up his job to work again at his own calling, took a similar job once more when imminent penniless ness so commanded, gave it up again when a little money furnished leeway for a return to his beloved art, and so alternated over a considerable period of time.

But even when employed in the embroidery factory, he worked feverishly in the evenings and at odd moments, giving form to the concepts that swarmed in his brain—those art children of his that craved to be born, and gave him no rest until they were rendered tangible.

It is not within the scope of this article to estimate Mr. Ruotolo's artistic worth. But this at least he has in common with truly great artists—that his concept of the beautiful in life extends beyond an appreciation of the merely pretty. He sees life for the composite of tragedy and comedy, large issues and small, pains, hopes, joys, thwarted yearnings, achievements, that it is; and his art reflects his vision. To him Cardinal Mercier, patient and loving Belgian prelate who shared unmurmuringly the sufferings of his war-ridden country, is "The Prince of Sorrows." To him Thomas Edison, "wizard of electricity," is not merely a modern inventor, but the very "Brother of Prometheus," that mythological founder of civilization, who brought to man fire stolen from the gods.

There is a twofold key to this young sculptor's success: his capacity for keeping an unswerving gaze upon the goal of his ambition, and an abiding faith in himself. The way of the artist is hard; the path is thorny, and Ruotolo, who is only at the beginning of his career, has many obstacles yet to overcome.

"But one must not see the obstacles," he says. "It is hard not to, did you say? Well—" with a characteristic Latin shrug—"if you see what you are aiming at clearly enough, it fills your whole vision. There is no room for the obstacles; they shrink to such tiny proportions that you clear them at a bound."